

Journal of Legislation

Volume 17 | Issue 1

Article 4

1-1-1991

On Help;Essay

Pawel Lukow

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/jleg>

Recommended Citation

Lukow, Pawel (1991) "On Help;Essay," *Journal of Legislation*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 4.
Available at: <http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/jleg/vol17/iss1/4>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Journal of Legislation at NDLScholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Legislation by an authorized administrator of NDLScholarship. For more information, please contact lawdr@nd.edu.

ESSAYS

ON HELP*

*Pawel Lukow***

Nearly all people agree that we ought to help others. But it is often unclear exactly what should be done to help. The question is not which of many possible ways of acting ought to be chosen, but rather, what conditions must be satisfied in order to make an act an act of help. In many situations it is hard to determine whether an act of mine performed to someone's advantage is help or a contingent byproduct of my behavior—an act of heroism or a simple case of doing something regardless of someone. Additionally, in trying to help someone, one may violate that person's liberties or interests, such as their interest in autonomy or in determining their own life plans.

It is all the more difficult to know when an act is an act of help because the effects of an act are often difficult to determine in advance. Knowing, after performing an act, that the act has helped someone is of little help from a moral point of view. Instead, we need to understand what the situation is and what the options are *before* acting, so that we can determine which possible act is the act required. The ideas on help presented in this article apply not only to individuals, but to social groups and nations as well.

Our world today is filled with people suffering from a wide variety of problems. For instance, hunger and poverty strike a segment of our society so large that it is unprecedented in scale. Yet these are not the only cases where help is required; all people need help of one sort or another.

No doubt, if someone thinks that it is his *duty* to help, or if he just wants to help, it is because of the existence of somebody's unsatisfied needs. Of course, it is possible to give help by satisfying someone's desires, but in such a case it would be odd to talk about the *duty* of realizing another's desires. The person who helps aims to make satisfaction of these needs possible. Therefore, the criterion for something being an act of help seems to be the efficiency of the performed act. Yet while such efficiency is necessary, it is not sufficient. Rather, the criterion for an act being an act of help is the creation of a mutual relationship between the helper and the party in need. It is a dual relationship, a moral and a prudential one; unless the two exist, there can be at most only an attempt to help.

It is often difficult to determine when a need exists. How can we distinguish needs from desires or whims? We cannot determine when the duty of help should be obeyed, or what should be done in order to help, unless we have a credible

* The author wishes to give special thanks to Professor William Ruddick for his helpful comments on the article and to Professor John B. Attanasio for his encouragement to publish it.

** Professor of Ethics, Institute of Philosophy, University of Warsaw, Poland.

1. The reader is requested to construe the masculine gender used in this essay in the generic sense, to include women as well as men.

definition or criterion of need. The best solution involves the parties themselves reaching a common understanding about the situation and need for help.

Obviously, help is a practice involving two parties: a helper and one in need. If someone acts to their own advantage by satisfying that other person's needs, then it is important that both parties be able to sincerely call the act of the helper an act of help.

Often, an act which is intended to help is not seen as such by the person supposedly being helped. If I knowingly buy a poor quality drawing from a person in the street and pay a relatively high price, I may do it with the view of helping a beginning artist. But he, at the same time, may be convinced that he has cheated me. Although he can spend the money he receives to satisfy his most pressing needs, I have nonetheless been deceived. Moreover, the "artist" can legitimately say that he has cheated me.

Similarly, if the artist does not spend the money to satisfy his needs but instead for alcohol, he may believe that I have helped him, but I may be convinced that my act was wrong. On the other hand, if I act against somebody's will, though I may satisfy his needs, he may not regard the act as an act of help.

Thus, efficiency does not suffice to make an act an act of help. Moreover, the intentions of both parties in and of themselves do not decide whether an act is an act of help. If the very same act can be described in different ways, it may be because different conceptual frameworks are used or because a misunderstanding has occurred. But if both the helper and the party that is to be helped succeed in using exactly the same language, the lack of understanding may be the result of differences in attitude towards certain elements of the situation. An act that may influence others, and that has been performed for their sake, will count as help only if both parties agree to a common way of describing the situation. If they do not agree, then they may be unable to come to terms on their future actions, feasible forms of cooperation, and the duties of the respective parties. They are unlikely to agree on the aims to be adopted or on the methods to achieve those aims.

The prerequisite of help is for both parties to consider the action taken to be a helping one. But when are parties likely to regard an act as an act of help? In other words, what conditions must be satisfied by both parties if they are to call an act not only an attempt to help but actual help? What must a person in need do if someone else's action aimed at satisfying his needs is to be considered help? And what must a helper do to help?

We say that someone should be helped if we *think* that his needs have not been satisfied and that he cannot satisfy them himself. That is, you should help somebody if he is in need and he cannot cope with the task he faces.

Moreover, we think that we have a duty to help somebody because we consider him and his purpose to be important. If somebody's purpose were not important to us, we would have no reason to try to carry it out. The importance of the aim can be of two sorts: either we have an interest in it or we perceive it to be valuable.

In the former case, we are doing something which is profitable for someone else, but the act cannot be called an act help. This is because we really do not want to help, but instead to realize our own end. It may be called an act of contract but not of help. When I have an interest in someone's purpose I consider it my own purpose as well, and his relationship to it as being of secondary importance.

If, on the other hand, the helper sees the aim of the person being helped as something valuable, the parties share a common purpose. Their desires to realize the value correspond and the parties regard each other as equally important co-realizers of the purpose. The helper takes into consideration not only the aim but also the person in need, recognizing that it is essential to help a *person*, not simply to perform an act of help.

If an act is to be an act of help, not only must the persons involved share a purpose, but they must jointly seek ways to achieve that purpose. For we cannot call help an action which, though efficient, is performed against the will of one of the parties. There is no help without the helper's consent to the proposed actions and, similarly, without the consent of the person in need to be helped. Otherwise, we may find ourselves violating important values or duties.

Therefore, help may occur when the parties arrive at a common understanding of the ends and ways of achieving those ends. For such an agreement to take place, both the helper and the person in need must use the same conceptual framework or mutually translatable concepts. In other words, the parties must understand each other, using a common moral language and having common attitudes toward the problem. Both parties must recognize the circumstances as those which require action by the helper. Moreover, the helper must consider the needs of the one to be helped and notice that they are endangered. Both parties must perceive certain aims that should be realized, but which cannot be achieved without cooperation between the parties.

In addition, agreement about which means will be successful is crucial. No measures should be ruled out simply based on its own merits, without considering the circumstances and, more importantly, the parties involved. It is true that some measures succeed sooner and are effortlessly applied, while others take time and are more difficult. But this is no reason to think that any particular measure is worth being chosen. If this were so, then by deciding that the easily applied methods are preferable, we would have to eliminate all people who are old, ill or handicapped in order to create a healthy society. Yet usually we are convinced that this is not the right way of dealing with problems. We perceive duties which have little to do with profit and loss.

If the circumstances themselves do not indicate which ways of acting are preferable, we must then look at the parties involved. It seems obvious that a person who cannot assure the realization of somebody else's needs cannot help and cannot be hoped to give help. So the person in need must possess some knowledge about those who could be hoped to give help. On the other hand, a person in need must know what he can suggest to the would-be helper as his aim. For he must keep in mind that his proposed ways of acting may not be accepted by the would-be helper, and that the would-be helper may not be prepared to exert the type or amount of effort requested. Thus, the party in need should know the consequences and costs which the would-be helper can be expected to accept to achieve the aim desired by the parties. The party to be helped must also possess some abilities and competencies in using the efforts of the helper. If the above conditions are not satisfied, then action becomes pointless and efforts are aimlessly wasted. As a consequence, help becomes impossible.

Consenting to common ends and means requires trust between the parties. In turn, trust requires competence by both parties. For example, when we visit a foreign city and ask a passer-by for directions, we must know how to use his

information, believe that he knows the city well, and trust that he does not intend to deceive us. What we lack is his knowledge concerning the city, and this knowledge is his help. His competence is his familiarity with the city and his ability to get from one place to another. It depends on us whether we use his knowledge and, first of all, whether we trust him. But to trust somebody, we need grounds for doing so.

Because we are strangers and we do not know the passer-by, our only grounds for believing him may be our experiences and previously acquired knowledge that enables us to presume that the information is correct. We use these general abilities along with our limited knowledge of the situation to detect any possible inconsistencies in the information given.

When we possess little knowledge or few abilities, we must rely on others. The less our abilities, the greater is our risk of being deceived. Therefore, our trust depends largely on our competencies. In situations requiring someone's help, it is in our own best interest to extend our own knowledge and abilities. Because we are in need, our abilities cannot be equal to those of a would-be helper. But we can determine how much we want to risk. The greater our qualifications, the better grounded our trust will be. The more we need, the more we must require of ourselves. We should enlarge our abilities—that is why a stranger attempts to find a map of the city.

Therefore, it seems clear why we are usually reluctant to ask for help. Our conviction that we should cope on our own and ask for help only in extremely difficult situations seems reasonable. Additionally, we think that we are allowed to ask for help only when it is absolutely necessary.

Yet we are living in a world where people are interdependent. Some view this as a sign of imperfection, while others see this interdependence as bringing about the possibility of friendship and love. When we are in a situation requiring help, we are forced to depend on somebody else. In such situations, many of us may feel humiliated or frustrated. Perhaps no person wants to be helped and dependent on others, but sometimes one must. Moreover, if an act of help is to occur and the plan of action is acceptable to both parties, the one to be helped must consent to the proposed action and the end to be achieved, even if consenting increases vexation.

In cases of emergency help, it is much more difficult to know what we should do and how we should behave. In emergency situations, we may not know whether we have actually helped somebody until after the fact. Yet even in an emergency situation, it seems worthwhile to try to resolve at least some of the problems which surround the act of help.

If we are to say that we should help others, then the rules of moral thinking require us to share each other's ends and agree to the means. Prudence, on the other hand, calls for our actions to be efficient ones. Both the helper and the person in need should maximize their competencies. In this way, an attempt to help can be turned into actual help.